

Hekate: Bringer of Light

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Abstract

In this paper, the author explores the origins, associations, and functions of the ancient goddess Hekate. The roles of Hekate in the myth of Demeter and Persephone are discussed, as are Hekate's place in the Eleusinian Mysteries. Finally, the author describes her own personal relationship to the goddess Hekate.

Keywords: Hekate, Hecate, Demeter, Persephone, transformation, torches, boundary, crossroads, liminal

Few days have gone by in the past months in which I did not ponder how to write this paper. (I have nine and a half pages of handwritten notes and corresponding references sitting in a folder next to me that I have been carrying around since November of 2012.) I cannot say precisely what the holdup is, nor why my motivation seems to have gone the way of the subject itself -- dried up and covered over by the minutes, seconds, hours that make up time. I could make excuses about my extended grief over unjustly losing my job and the resulting financial hardship and loneliness that have plagued me. I could also blame the lack of multiple computers and my father's tendency to dominate the only functioning one, my laptop. Of course anxiety and depression are constants in my life, as are self-doubt and self-loathing. Yet I believe the most plausible explanation is the subject itself. I have never had easy mother-daughter relationships: my adopted mother Rose and I continue to struggle to understand and express love to one another, and I have never met the woman who at such a young age, gave birth to me and then surrendered me to the state of Michigan. Nor do I have children of my own, save my cats and former students; whether or not this is a result of the circumstances of my own birth is debatable.

Nonetheless, I feel like fraud incorporating the tale of a grieving mother and a lost daughter in an emotionally meaningful way that translates into an adequate academic piece. I find, instead, that the aspect of the tale and mysteries of the Demeter/Persephone narrative that I am most drawn to and intrigued by is the role of Hekate. It is through her that I find my way in to the myth that actually feels authentic. Hekate is a complex goddess, taking on multiple aspects: "Hekate was worshipped in five primary roles ... Propylaia (Guardian), Propolos (Guide and Companion), Phosphoros (Light-Bringer), Kourotrophos (Goddess of Women), and Chthonia (Goddess of the Underworld)" (Rose, 2001, p. 174). Indeed, "Hekate is an all-

encompassing deity, representing both good and evil, the rational and irrational, the celestial and chthonic” (Winkle, 2002, p. 81). She has also served as an inspiration and patron during this dark time in my life.

Hekate, or Hecate, plays a role both in the story of Demeter/Persephone as well as in the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries. Hekate makes her first appearance in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* in lines 24-25, in conjunction with the abduction of Persephone. She is the only one to hear Persephone's cries:

She screamed with a shrill voice,
calling on her father, the son of Kronos highest and best.
Not one of the immortal or of humankind
heard her voice, nor the olives bright with fruit,
except the daughter of Persaios; tender of heart
she heard it from her cave, Hekate of the delicate veil. (Foley, 1994, p. 2)

Giving the nature of Hekate, it is not surprising that she is the sole witness to Persephone's abduction. Often depicted as having three faces, Hekate is "all-seeing" (Feather, Hekate's Hordes: Memoir's Voice, 2009, p. 2). It would be unthinkable that any event occur of which Hekate did not have knowledge. Yet, having the attribute of all-seeing does not necessarily correspond with action. Indeed, it is a full nine days before Hekate informs Demeter of what she knows (Foley, 1994, p. 4). Waiting is not a function of malicious intent; rather, another key aspect of Hekate is her role not only as all-seeing but also as witness or guardian.

In fact, Hekate is a goddess of boundaries and transitions, not disturbed by pain, trauma, or messiness -- all of which are necessary byproducts of growth and change. "Whether birthing or dying, creation or decay, she is witness to process and change" (Feather, Re-Imagining Hekate: Muse for Memoir, 2011, p. 17). Thus Hekate's initial choice to simply bear witness to

the horror she has heard is emblematic of the need for transitions to occur, no matter how painful. Hekate can be seen as both a guide and an omen to Persephone's ordeal:

Surely it is Hekate who stands alongside us during those terrible and terrifying chaotic times ... it is Hekate, the goddess of chaos, who is not troubled by messiness and disorder, who is not intimidated by ambiguity, who is not alarmed by uncertainty, and who refuses to shrink before the terror of depression. (Friedman, 2002, pp. 217-218)

Hekate also serves as both companion and guide to Demeter during her own transformation; Demeter, bereft at the loss of her daughter, exhibits very powerful human emotions. Thus, Hekate's appearance in the Demeter/Persephone story "falls precisely at the point where the poem introduces humankind ... Zeus has acted with the impunity of the gods to sanction Persephone's capture. Demeter now experiences the emotional distress and helplessness of the human world" (Tucker, 2011, pp. 47-48). Indeed Hekate personifies "Change itself," and is also associated with "random Chance," "Growth and Decay," and "Creation and Doom" (Marx, 2006, pp. 103-104).

Hekate's initial appearance in the Demeter/Persephone story heralds both change and hope; there will be unavoidable change accompanied by discomfort and suffering, but Hekate will stand alongside as witness and guardian throughout the entire process. It is not surprising that Hekate is associated with "the most profound crossing of boundaries -- when the soul enters the body and departs it at death" (Friedman, 2002, p. 187). Arguably, Hekate presides over all boundaries, not just those between life and death. "Hecate helps people cross difficult boundaries of all sorts, where significance or risk lies in the crossing" (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, p. 2). She can assist in healing through the integration of the shadow parts of oneself:

Hecate ... is the assurance that throughout the darkest night of loss, she is present ... when we ask her for help, when we honor her ... she is the one who provides safe passage when our world is torn asunder. (Damiani, 1998, p. 202)

Invoking and meditating on Hecate as a dark goddess "may tend to unlock repressed emotions" allowing them to be integrated into one's psyche (Hansen, 2002, p. 20). Hecate's choice to allow both Persephone and Demeter to undergo their own painful, yet necessary, separation and subsequent transformations results in both goddesses having a greater capacity for understanding the human experience:

From Demeter's own experience and her connection with the human family of Celeus and Mentaneira, she comes to understand the life struggles, the power of grief, and the human concern with death and the afterlife ... Central to this dynamic interactions of goddess and humans is the establishment of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Demeter has learned to care for the humans who befriended her in her guise as a mortal. Her response is the establishment of ceremonies beyond the rituals of appeasing the gods through sacrifices. (Tucker, 2011, p. 48)

None of this would have occurred without Hecate as catalyst.

It is odd to imagine a goddess who is associated with suffering, darkness, and chaos as a goddess of hope and protection, yet Hecate's complex and paradoxical nature affords just that, especially to women. In ancient Greece, she was often envisioned as a wedding attendant and called on by midwives; "Hecate, too, exhibited a concern for women that extended from the time they were ready for marriage through childbirth" (Johnston, 1999, p. 211). This concern extended to women who failed to successfully navigate life transitions and young women who died before their time (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, pp. 2-3). Her very nature as "goddess of darkness and liminality" allows her to play the role of "the goddess of personal transformation" (Friedman, 2002, p. 191). Hecate serves as a guide "through the dangerous darkness of chaotic uncertainties" while simultaneously "giving promise of new possibilities and patterns" (Friedman, 2002, p. 207). Thus, she can be defined as both a "liberator" (Friedman, 2002, p.

218) and "good medicine" (Friedman, 2002, p. 221). The metaphor of Hekate as "the composter" is quite apt, as she can be seen as "breaking down old or decaying forms" and then assisting in the transformation to something new and different, most often better (Feather, *Hekate's Hordes: Memoir's Voice*, 2009, p. 2).

In her role of guarding Persephone while she is in Hades, Hecate, as an archaic Mistress of the Dark, may be agreeing to initiate Persephone into her new role as Queen of the Underworld. Hecate aids in reconstituting an older form of the Great Mother Goddess, inclusive of the Dark aspects of the feminine, a form that Zeus's Olympian order ignores. (Wilkinson, 1996. p. 38)

Her role of guardian extends to literal boundaries, as "the protectress of remote places, a guardian of roads and byways" (Damiani, 1998, p. 91). It was common to set up hekataia, images of Hekate, at city entrances and important areas in and near cities and in front of homes (Johnston, 1999, pp. 207-208). Hekate was "regarded as a universal door-warder and gate-guardian, and so stood before palaces, temples, and all private homes" (Marx, 2006, p. 105). Hekataia offered "general protection on all who dwelt within a house or passed through its doors" (Marx, 2006, p. 105) and were also placed at the crossroads, where three roads meet because "the intersection ... was particularly sacred to Hecate" (Damiani, 1998, p. 92). Thus, Hekate is both the "Goddess of the entranceways and crossroads" and the "Goddess of Transitions" (Rose, 2001, pp. 163-164). She was routinely consulted by travelers before taking a trip and then thanked upon a safe return (Marx, 2006, p. 106). Hekate is also depicted as "holder of the keys that open realms" (Marx, 2006, p. 88).

Hekate makes her second appearance in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* in lines 51-63, when she chooses to inform Demeter of her knowledge of Persephone's abduction:

But when the tenth Dawn came shining on her,
Hekate met her, holding a torch in her hands,
to give her a message. She spoke as follows:

"Divine Demeter, giver of seasons and glorious gifts,
 who of the immortals or mortal men
 seized Persephone and grieved your heart
 For I heard a voice but did not see with my eyes
 who he was. To you I tell at once the whole truth."
 Thus Hekate spoke. The daughter of fair-tressed Rheia
 said not a word, but rushed off at her side
 holding torches ablaze in her hands.
 They came to Helios, observer of gods and mortals,
 and stood before his horses. (Foley, 1994, p. 4)

In this passage, Hekate serves as a messenger and companion to Demeter, "presaging perhaps the aspect of the Goddess recovered in the transformation of Kore to Persephone" (Carlson, 1997, p. 23). Hekate's role of light-bringer or torch-bearer is thus both literal and figurative; she is explicitly referred to as "bringer of light" (Damiani, 1998, p. 94). She not only brings light in the form of burning torches but also the light of knowledge or insight. "Carrying two torches held high above her head, Hekate, goddess of the liminal, the threshold, and the dark moist underworld of Soul accompanied those that journeyed into the darkness" (O'Dell, 2012, p. 29). Her torches can be viewed as "the spark guiding an idea, evoking its own luminescence and insight" (Feather, *Hekate's Hordes: Memoir's Voice*, 2009, p. 59). Hekate is the "intermediary between humanity and divine" (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, p. 4) and is understood as a psychopomp, or one who leads or guides others "into the unknown beyond the mortal world" (Ripley, 2008, p. 173). This unknown territory can include the unconscious or psyche: Psychopomps also "act as guides toward sleep and dreams" (Ripley, 2008, p. 175).

Thus, writers may call on Hekate for strength and inspiration, invoking both her liminal qualities as psychopomp and her aspect of light-bearer, referring to her as "muse of darkness, mediator between a writer and terror, between words and the abyss of silence" (Feather, *Re-Imagining Hekate: Muse for Memoir*, 2011, p. 7). Hekate has been described as "a powerful

life-giving or *zoogonic* goddess who mediates between the intelligible realm of ideas and the sensible realm of nature" (Majercik, 2001, p. 286) and is also referred to as "'median, 'center', 'life-giving', 'receptive womb', 'fullness'" (Majercik, 2001, p. 292). Hekate resides "in the intermediary space between two worlds -- the place of the Soul" and is the "Soul-Womb that birthed ideas" (O'Dell, 2012, p. 29). Again all of these traits position Hekate as a goddess of writers, particularly women writers. "For the woman storyteller, the individual Muse, Hekate, stands at the crossroads where Memory, Meditation, and Song meet. She is not there *either* in her birth or her life-giving form or in her death-giving aspect, but as *both* simultaneously. She is opportunity and danger, captivation and captivity, the flowing river and the stagnant pond" (Rose, 2001, p. 152).

Hekate is also an appropriate Muse for writing about personal, often difficult and uncomfortable, topics: "Hekate-writing ... draws a writer into his or her own particular darkness, often into the places of 'garbage' left by the ego when it doesn't feel well reflected or elevated" (Feather, *Re-Imagining Hekate: Muse for Memoir*, 2011, p. 16). Yet Hekate is independent and makes her own decisions regarding what she chooses to reveal or bestow: "She gives, refuses to give, and takes away according to *Her* wishes" (Rose, 2001, p. 169). Just as with integrating shadow parts of self, surrendering to the Muse of Hekate while writing or creating can be a painful process. "She is ally and ogre simultaneously" (Rose, 2001, p. 187). This is exemplified by Persephone's ordeal, specifically her descent into the underworld, as a necessary part of human experience, healing, and creation: "The story of Demeter and Persephone involves tasks that are representative of healing wounds and suffering from the feminine yin aspects of a woman's life" (Hansen, 2002, p. 27). It is her complex nature which invokes both creativity and healing: "Situated at the threshold, crossroads, and her cave, Hekate's triune form presides over

the liminal, holding the tension between past, present, and future, visually suggesting the polycentric perspective needed when entering the underworld" (Feather, *Re-Imagining Hekate: Muse for Memoir*, 2011, p. 7).

Hekate's complexity extends beyond her five roles and triune form; she is called the daughter of Night and is associated with "the underworld, the chariot, wrath and the lunar aspect" (Shamas, 2003, p. 81). Her name has several meanings, including "far-darting one" or "far-off one" and "many-headed" (Shamas, 2003, p. 98). The root of her name, heq, is Egyptian, meaning "intelligence," and as "The Queen of Shades" she was the "source of 'hekau,' the 'words of power' that commanded and decided all things" (Mantecon, 1993, p. 82). Originating outside of Greece, perhaps in Asia Minor or Egypt, Hekate first appeared in Greek lore and mythology in the 6th century BCE (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, p. 2). She is "both an Olympian Goddess and a Titan" and is "a remnant ... of the old cosmic Goddess of Death and Regeneration" (Wilkinson, 1996, pp. 37-38). Hekate was called "most lovely one" (Mantecon, 1993, p. 83) and "She who works her will" (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, p. 2). The fact that she resides in a cave is significant: "The Greeks, using the cave as a metaphorical image of the underworld, gave it four functions: birthing and nurturing, educating and healing, as oracle, and as world cave" (Feather, *Re-Imagining Hekate: Muse for Memoir*, 2011, p. 10).

Hekate is frequently envisioned as accompanied by hounds and is referred to as "dog-lover," "queen of dogs," and "black dog" (Marx, 2006, p. 110). She carries not only torches but also a "bullroarer," a simple instrument made by "tying a rope through a center hole cut into a round disc" (O'Dell, 2012, p. 29). Ancient Greeks associated her with the sound of the wind (O'Dell, 2012, p. 30). She is the "goddess of detritus and all that has been rejected," a "transmissive intermediary," the "queen of hidden parts," and both the "overseer and instigator"

of "disorder and disharmony" (Feather, *Hekate's Hordes: Memoir's Voice*, 2009, pp. 2, 15, 46, 47-48). Her primary symbols are keys, two torches, dogs, and hordes of restless souls (Feather, *Hekate's Hordes: Memoir's Voice*, 2009, p. 21). However, her symbols vary at different sites: "At her site in Lagina, Hekate's primary symbols were the giant gate and the sacred key believed to open the entrance to invisible realms. At Eleusis she is found in a votive image (400 BCE) holding torches" (Feather, *Hekate's Hordes: Memoir's Voice*, 2009, p. 36). Hekate also has a snake-like nature: "her serpentine aspects are often mentioned in magical invocations" and she is described as "snaky-haired" (Winkle, 2002, p. 112).

Hekate's associations with both crossroads and the underworld lend a partial explanation for one of the forms her tribute takes: Hekate suppers. Every month, usually at the New Moon, ancient Greeks laid offerings for Hekate at the site of crossroads (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, p. 5). These offerings included food as well as household waste (Shamas, 2003, pp. 112-113). These suppers served both functions of appeasing or honoring Hekate and as purification, or elements of *karharmata*. "Typical ingredients of a *katharmata* were waste blood, water, garbage, trash, and offscourings. Dog sacrifices were also part of Hekate's rites, and sometimes a departed canine was left along with the Supper" (Shamas, 2003, p. 113). These dog sacrifices seem to be a Greek phenomenon; "While dog-sacrifices are not recorded for the original Hekate in Asia Minor, they are abundantly documented for the Greek world -- and not only for Hekate. The Greeks considered dog a perfectly ordinary and inexpensive meat" (Marx, 2006, p. 109).

Household waste could also be offered and then burned in a doorway instead of at a crossroads; although, the remnants of these burnings were to be disposed of ultimately at a crossroads. "The potsherd on which the rubbish was burnt was carried away, thrown, and abandoned without looking back" (Marx, 2006, p. 106). These suppers and offerings of waste

may in fact be an acknowledgement of Hekate's association with the earth and fertility and the cycle of death and rebirth. "Hecate is equated not only with earth, but all that earth implies: material existence, which carries an implicit death sentence for all that come into being" (Marx, 2006, p. 107). Ironically, celebrations and rituals dedicated to Hekate did not always manifest in this way:

Hecate was not always considered demonic ... she was the central figure in celebrations held by women to honor the Mother, Rearer of Children. It celebrated those children born of the same mothers. These festivals were held at the crossroads. No men were allowed to be present. (Damiani, 1998, p. 93)

Rather than being interpreted as negative aspects, Hekate's associations with the physical manifestations of living and dying may point to the fact that "magical healing arts arise from their chthonic and fruitful aspects" (Ripley, 2008, p. 194). Hekate is a clearly chthonic deity, or "of the Earth" (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, p. 3). Yet she is both material and cosmic simultaneously; she resides in and embodies a third space.

In the Chaldean oracles, Hekate was known as the Cosmic Soul, one of the three Divine Ones who created the cosmos and the world. Hekate occupied the space between the other two gods, as the center -- the one who birthed Soul" (O'Dell, 2012, p. 30). She is also known as the "World Soul" and serves as the "intermediary between intellect and body -- between the two worlds represented as God and human. (O'Dell, 2012, p. 155)

Hekate is integral to triads, whether they be as the space between, the intermediary, or an aspect of the Goddess; "from the beginning Hekate is multiple, yet one" (Feather, Hekate's Hordes: Memoir's Voice, 2009, p. 40). She forms a triad with Demeter and Persephone as well as one with Artemis/Diana and Selene (Shamas, 2003, p. 75).

Diana and Hekate are commonly combined, along with Persephone into the popular 'Triple Artemis.' In the Greek magical papyri Diana and Hekate (along with Persephone and Selene) are often combined into a single goddess and called upon for aid in the casting of spells. (Winkle, 2002, pp. 90-91)

Thus, Hekate can be regarded as “the supreme goddess of popular magic” (Winkle, 2002, p. 104). As discussed above, Hekate is commonly depicted as either three-bodied or three-headed (Shamas, 2003, p. 95). She is also associated with three major mysteries: Eleusis, Samothrace, and Aiginia (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, p. 4) and is closely allied with the Furies (Winkle, 2002, p. 88).

Hekate makes her final appearance in the Demeter/Persephone narrative in lines 438-440, when Persephone and Demeter are reunited upon Persephone's ascent from the underworld:

Hekate of the delicate veil drew near them
and often caressed the daughter of holy Demeter;
from that time this lady served as her chief attendant. (Foley, 1994, p. 24)

This is an extension of Hekate's roles of guardian, guide and companion, and goddess of women. "Hekate was before, behind, and next to Persephone as she traveled to and from Hades" (O'Dell, 2012, p. 32). Hekate's role of companion and guide most likely was the source for the role of guide to initiates she played in the Mysteries of Eleusis; Hekate "leads the female initiates" to "the Great Goddesses" (Rose, 2001, p. 168). Hekate's role of companion to Persephone is "a departure from the other stories of the Olympic tradition ... the myth has become bound to the world, and the relation of the three goddesses begins to mimic an intergenerational family" (Tucker, 2011, p. 49). In addition, there is a "tradition that describes Hekate as companion to Persephone for her return from Hades, and the extension of this role of companion to mortal women -- perhaps associated with the initiation ritual at Eleusis" (Ripley, 2008, pp. 177-178). Given her ability to travel to and from Hades, it is not surprising that "no figure is more closely associated with the returning souls of the dead than Hekate" (Johnston, 1999, p. 203). This association is translated to "dominion over restless souls" and effectively makes Hekate the

"magician's goddess," as "control of a soul was essential to most ancient magical procedures" (Johnston, 1999, p. 204).

Hekate's control over restless souls meant that she could not only protect from demons but also could terrorize with demons; "Hecate would naturally become known as a goddess who could also *refuse* to avert the demons, or even drive them on against unfortunate individuals" (Johnston, 1999, p. 209). This is illustrated clearly at the mysteries of Eleusis, in which Hecate may have been invoked for justice or retribution:

At Eleusis, thick nails were driven into the ground or altar, piercing through a piece of parchment rolled into a flattened tub, on which was written the name of someone to be cursed -- most commonly politicians. Hecate was to be invoked as the parchment was ritually burnt. (Domenic, Winter 2009/2010, p. 4)

Thus, Hekate could be petitioned to act on a human's behalf, as could the souls whom she held dominion over (Ripley, 2008, p. 193).

In this sense, Hekate is a keeper of the cosmic order (Winkle, 2002, p. 123). Her associations extend to the more gruesome; "Hekate herself is often invoked by the epithet 'blood-drinking' and is seen drinking blood in visions" (Winkle, 2002, p. 111). Arguably, she is Fortune personified; "Fortune ... found a more concrete identity in the person of Hekate, in her chthonic role as fearsome goddess of magic" (Winkle, 2002, p. 116). Nature is her sphere (Winkle, 2002, p. 121). However, consistent with her complex nature, Hekate embodies not only Fortune but Justice: "the Hekate you meet is the Hekate you deserve" (Winkle, 2002, p. 136). What is certain is that Hekate had a "religious following at Eleusis" and at least one shrine "within the temple precinct at Eleusis" (Keller, 2012, p. 92). This is fittingly located "inside Demeter's precinct, between the Grotto of Hades and Demeter's temple" (Keller, 2012, p. 352).

In my own life, I have attempted to invoke Hekate frequently over the past year. When my family's black Newfoundland dog, Friendly, died of liver failure a little over a year ago, I asked her to allow him to join her pack, as I know she is particularly fond of black dogs. Hekate is whom I turned to when pleading for justice, anointing a black candle with olive oil and my own blood before burning it on my altar. Hekate is also the deity I invoked during the preparation and execution of the war bottle aimed at the woman responsible for harming me and my former students, much as the initiates at Eleusis did with their curses. I do not merely ask for Hekate's intervention, I also seek to honor her. I regularly leave offerings of leftover food scraps at two crossroads near my current house -- throwing them out the window of my truck or dropping them during my walks -- always careful not to look back afterward. In addition, I have a small painting of her on my altar. I would like to think that Hekate serves as a witness to my grief and rage and has assisted me through this dark and transformative time. Her card has shown up in multiple readings I have had during the last year -- in one deck she is triple-headed, surrounded by dogs; in another deck, she is dressed completely in black, two blazing torches held aloft. It is also my hope that researching and writing about Hekate will not only help me to understand and honor her but also foster her continuing presence in my life.

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